

Horrible Images of Death in Haiti

By Andrew Alexander

Given the magnitude of earthquake devastation in Haiti this month, Post readers expected to see photos of unspeakable suffering. But many were not prepared for days of graphic depictions of death.

One showed a charred, still-smoldering body. Another captured a corpse being dumped like garbage into a truck. In yet another photo dominating the front page, a Haitian man crawled through rubble beside a girl who had been crushed to death.

It upset longtime Post reader Ruth Hartmann of Bethesda, Md. "To see a child being crushed, to me, is not a good editorial policy," she told me. "It would have been more positive to see an injured child being helped by someone."

Chris Powers of Silver Spring, Md., agreed. "I do not mind realism in photojournalism," he e-mailed. "But I do mind sensationalism and I do mind splashing it on the front page, where I have no choice but to look."

News organizations have always wrestled with where to draw the line in depicting death.

"In Haiti, where the numbers are staggering, to show it without showing dead bodies would be impossible," said Terry Eiler, director of the School of Visual Communication at Ohio University. But "there is a point of taste and decency ... that I think everybody struggles with."

Veteran Post photographer Carol Guzy, who took many of the most powerful images, is intimately familiar with Haiti. One of her three Pulitzer Prizes was awarded in 1995 for her photo coverage of civil unrest there. Her stunning photos after the earthquake have been evocative, with some of the most graphic given prominent display in the newspaper.

"The magnitude of the story, on so many levels, is so deep that it gives us pause not to run the hardest-hitting images," said Post photo director Michel du Cille. "But we don't go just for the graphic shock value."

Selecting sensitive photos for the newspaper typically includes discussion involving top editors. In the case of Guzy's Jan. 15 front-page photo of the man crawling past the crushed girl, editors "overwhelmingly felt we should run it where we ran it" on the front page, said Bonnie Jo Mount, picture editor. She said the man's emergence through the debris gave a "sense that there was life beyond" the tragedy.

Online, The Post displayed hundreds of images by Guzy, fellow Post photographer Nikki Kahn and various photo services. Some are disquieting, showing decaying bodies piled in a city morgue and corpses strewn on a street. But the photos on the Web site are preceded by a large red "WARNING": "Some images in this gallery may be disturbing because of their violent or graphic nature."

Many readers who complained to The Post objected most to the gruesome images being featured on the newspaper's front page, where there is no warning.

"We know one can get even worse stuff from the Internet," wrote Ron Kelly of Herndon, Va., "yet there are some measures of decency (that should) prevent it from being posted on front pages of newspapers."

The news industry has no universally accepted rules on use of disturbing images. Some apply what Eiler called the "Cheerios test." How will readers, especially those who may want to shield their young children, react to it over the breakfast table?

Most newspapers stay clear of dead babies. "In terms of a hot-button issue, I don't think you can get a button hotter than a picture of a dead child," said Donald R. Winslow, who edits News Photographer magazine for the National Press Photographers Association.

Others shy from running explicit photos of deaths in their circulation area because many readers may be connected to the deceased. In the case of Haiti, Eiler said, "Distance allows some to feel as if it's happening away from us."

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In the end, whether (and where) to publish upsetting images is subjective.

Readers are never wrong to complain if they feel The Post has violated their sensibilities. They pay for the newspaper, after all, and it comes into their homes unfiltered.

The Post could have mitigated adverse reaction with editor's notes explaining the rationale for running the most troubling photos. Even if they disagree, readers are more accepting when they know editors have taken their feelings into account.

But I'm comfortable with The Post's decisions, including the front-page play. Journalism is about truth, and the horrific images convey reality. Photos, even unsettling ones, are meant to capture our emotions.

"Words make people think," Winslow noted. "But pictures make people feel."

Alexander is ombudsman for The Washington Post.

WASHINGTON POST-BLOOMBERG – 01-25-10

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